

SB24 TESTIMONY

Montana is challenged by a variety of difficult natural resource policy and management issues, including, but not limited to, land use planning; water quality and quantity; timber management; mineral development; range management; management of sensitive species; and, wildlife management on private lands. Common to all of these issues is the attitude that, in Montana, we would rather fight than win. The resulting conflict precludes responsible and durable solutions; causes animosity; and, encourages a cycle of more conflict.

Although values may differ, Montanans with interests in natural resource issues are interdependent. Unfortunately, the frequency and intensity of natural resource conflicts prevent the implementation of solutions that reflect our interdependence.

Conservation of ecological order is inseparable from conservation of social order. A bright Montana future – a future that cherishes the best of our natural resource values and the best of our traditions, while also effectively leveraging the economic value of our natural resources – requires a new model for engaging people in problem solving.

As defined by statute, the purpose of the Montana Consensus Council is to promote fair, effective, and efficient processes for building agreement on natural resource and other public policy issues that are important to Montanans. In doing its work, the Council's approach has been to help people effectively participate in interest-based problem solving approaches; to work together to achieve shared objectives; and, to resolve some of Montana's many contentious natural resource issues. Fundamental to this approach is the premise that responsible natural resource management is vital to Montana's future. The operational definition of "responsible" is a philosophy that promotes sustainable ecological systems; promotes economically vibrant Montana communities; and, enfranchises the people who are interested in and affected by natural resource management decisions.

The Consensus Council has not been financially viable. However, that failure does not disprove the merits of the collaboration model nor does it diminish the State of Montana's responsibility to promote a collaborative approach in the formulation of natural resource policy. So, if the Legislature decides to repeal the statute that authorizes the Montana Consensus Council, what do you propose as an alternative to it?

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